Jean Cocteau, BEAUTY AND THE BEAST/LA BELLE ET LA BÊTE (1946, 96 min)

Director Jean Cocteau
Writer Jean Cocteau
Story Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont
Produced André Paulvé
Original music Georges Auric
Cinematography Henri Alekan
Film Editing Claude Ibéria
Makeup Hagop Arakelian
Set Decoration Lucien Carré
Production Design Christian Bérard & Lucien Carré
Jean Marais Avenant/The Beast/The Prince
Josette Day Beauty
Mila Parély Félicie
Nane Germon Adélaïde
Michel Auclair Ludovic
Raoul Marco The usurer
Marcel André The Merchant (father)
Jean Cocteau voice of the magic objects


JOSETTE DAY (née Josette Dagory, 1914, Paris—29 June 1978, Paris) acted in nearly 40 films, but never in a role as perfectly suited to her as Cocteau’s Beauty. Some of her other films are Les Parents terribles (1948), Arlette et l’amour (1943), Le Patriote (1938), Soeurs d’armes (1937), Club de femmes (1936), Lucrèce Borgia (1935), and Le Barbier de Séville (1933).

GEORGES AURIC (15 February 1899, Lodève, France—23 July 1983) composed the scores of for well over 100 films, among them The Poppy is Also a Flower (1966), The Innocents (1961), Le Testament d’Orphée (1960), Princesse de Clèves (1960), Bonjour tristesse (1958), Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison (1957), The Story of Esther Costello (1957), Lola Montès (1955), Le Salaire de la peur (The Wages of Fear, 1953), Roman Holiday (1953), Moulin Rouge (1952), The Lavender Hill Mob (1951), Orphée (1949), L’Aigle à deux têtes (1947), L’Éternel retour (1943), and Le Sang d’un poète (1930).

HENRI ALEKAN (10 February 1909, Paris—15 June 2001, Auxerre, Bourgogne, France, leukemia) shot about 80 films, the last of which was Golem, le jardin périfié/Golem: The Petrified Garden (1993) and the first of which La Vie est à nous/The People of France (1936). Some of the others were Der Himmel über Berlin/Wings of Desire (1987), Notre Nazi/Our Nazi (1984), La Truite/The Troute (1982), Soleil rouge/Red Sun (1971), Mayerling (1968), Poppies Are Also Flowers (1966), Topkapi (1964), La Princesse de Clèves/The Princess of Cleves (1961), Anna Karenînîa (1948), Les Maudits/The Damned (1947), and La Danseuse rouge (1937).

French director and scenarist, poet, novelist, dramatist and illustrator—one of the most diversely talented creators of the twentieth century—was born into a rich middle-class family in Maisons-Lafitte, near Paris. He was brought up in Paris, where his maternal grandfather owned a house in the vicinity of Pigalle, on the Rue de Bruyère. He thus belonged to Montmartre, though to the bourgeois rather than to the artistic part of it. His father, Georges Cocteau, spent all his life working as a stockbroker, though his only real passion was painting. Cocteau’s mother, Eugénie was the daughter of Eugène Lecompte, who owned the brokerage house where Georges worked, the family houses, and a rich collection of art objects, including several Stradivarius violins that were regularly used by visiting virtuosi at the Lecomptes’ weekly chamber music concerts.

Jean Cocteau was educated at the Lycée Condorcet and later insisted (characteristically) that he was le cancre par excellence there—the prize booby of his class. His school reports contradict that. He was undeniably an enfant terrible (and was expelled from the school in the spring of 1904), but one who showed signs of a lively mind and a precocious talent for sketching and versifying. It was at Condorcet that Cocteau had his first homosexual infatuation, with a boy called Pierre Dargelos whose haunting reincarnations appear throughout Cocteau’s work—the shameless untutored faun whose mouth and eyes can kill.

Frederick Brown argues from this “that Cocteau was already at odds with the ideal double that he would spend his life pursuing. Dargelos is a real name—it may be found on yellowing rosters—but its is equally Cocteau’s pseudonym for his primal malediction, for the angelic offspring of his catastrophe. A decade after leaving Condorcet he wrote: ‘At an age when gender does not yet influence decisions of the flesh, my desire was not to reach, not to touch, nor to embrace the elected person, but to be him....What loneliness!’ This original forfeiture, placing the locus of Being outside himself, would make solitude intolerable and anonymity a form of death. He was fated to crave love in order to be.” This hunger for love and recognition accounts well enough for Cocteau’s constant striving to be in the forefront of the social, artistic, and literary avant-garde, and his ardent pursuit of friendship with all the other leaders of artistic Paris.

...By the middle of World War I, Cocteau was writing for the Ballets Russes, obeying Diaghilev’s famous injunction “Astonish me” with the ballet Parade (décor by Picasso, music by Eric Satie), the great succès de scandale of 1917. Cocteau was exempted by ill health from military service but made his way to the battlefront with an ambulance unit, met and flew with the aviator Roland Garros, and encountered the problems and adventures imaginatively recalled in his novel Thomas l’imposteur (1923).

Cocteau’s star rose rapidly after the war....There were modernistic adaptations of Sophocles’ Antigone (1922, with scenery by Picasso) and of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet (1924), and an original one-act play, Orphée (1926). Not content to seem merely a universal man of letters, Cocteau painted and drew, designed tapestries, tinkered with typography, wrote program notes for avant-garde composers, and championed American jazz and Charlie Chaplin....He knew everyone of interest or social importance, from Picasso to the Prince of Wales. He also formed a close emotional and creative liaison with the younger writer Raymond Radiguet, whose death at the age of twenty-three temporarily shattered Cocteau. He sought solace in opium, then in religion, but before long thumbed his nose at Jacques Maritain, his spiritual counselor, and resumed his old life.

...For Cocteau, poetry was the supreme art and the poet the supreme being, uniquely in touch with ultimate realities, especially death, which in his works is not the end but a gateway to self-realization. This is the theme of virtually all of his films, including the first, Le Sang d’un poète (The Blood of a Poet, 1930-1932). In this silent allegory the poet recognizes and tries to escape his muse, wrestles with his past, dies and is resurrected. These incidents, recounted in narcissistic images of mirrors and self-portraits that speak, are framed by a shot of a collapsing building to show that they take place in only a moment of “real” time.

With its dreamlike atmosphere and mysterious imagery, this autobiographical film-poem resembles such surrealist pictures as Buñuel’s L’Age d’or, made at the same time and for the same patron, the Vicomte de Noailles. (Cocteau, who regarded the surrealists as rivals, denied the resemblance.)...Cocteau’s second film as director was La Belle et la Bête (Beauty and the Beast, 1946). To save her father from the Beast’s wrath, Beauty (Josette Day) allows herself to be incarcerated in the monster’s magic castle, which is lit by candelabra held by disembodied arms and decorated with living statues. Gradually she comes to recognize the Beasts’s essential gentleness and melancholy, and warms to him when he allows her to visit her sick father. But she stays too long, and when she returns the heartbroken Beast is dying. Her dissolve admirer Avenant arrives to rescue her and to steal the Beast’s treasure. He fails, and dies at the same moment as the Beast. Avenant becomes the dead monster and the Beast, transfigured by Beauty’s look of love, is reborn as a more princely Avenant.

In Cocteau’s hands the story becomes an illustration of his central theme: “To live you must die.” To this paradox he adds thought-provoking ambiguity by casting Jean Marais as both Avenant and the Beast. There was great praise for Cocteau’s handling of tone and pace in the film, from the broad humor of
Beauty’s rustic homelife to the dreamlike slow motion of her entry into the castle. He and his designer Christian Bérard rigorously eschewed the kind of misty effects usually employed to suggest magic and the supernatural—Cocteau said of Bérard that he was the only one to understand that vagueness is unsuitable to the world of the fairy tale and that mystery exists only in precise things.” Bérard’s gorgeous costumes and Henri Alekan’s camera style are both said to have been inspired by Dutch paintings, especially the works of Vermeer. The score was by George Auric, who provided the music for all of Cocteau’s films except the last, La Belle et la Bête, “one of the great works of poetic cinema,” was made in the face of a daunting succession of difficulties and afflictions, described in Cocteau’s Diary of a Film.

There followed two pictures which Cocteau adapted from his own plays. L’Aigle à deux têtes (The Eagle has Two Heads, 1947)... and Les Parents terribles (1948).... The picture was directed by Jean-Pierre Melville, reportedly in close collaboration with Cocteau, who is credited only as a scenarist and adapter (of his own novel). Central to Cocteau’s work in the cinema are three intensely personal films in which he explores through the figure of Orpheus his obsession with the role of the poet, torn between the familiar and the unknown. This trilogy, which began with Le Sang d’un poète, continued with Orphée (Orpheus, 1950), developed from his 1925 play, and universally recognized to be his masterpiece....

It was nine years before Cocteau completed his Orphic trilogy with his Le Testament d’Orphée, which he clearly intended as his own testament as well as Orpheus’. It is a fable in which the director him self (then seventy) appears as a time-traveler....

In 1955 the enfant terrible Cocteau became one of the “Immortals” of the Académie Française. “It is not up to us to obey the public, which does not know what it wants,” he said once, “but to compel the public to follow us. If it refuses we must use tricks: images, stars, decors, and other magic lanterns, suitable to intrigue children and make them swallow the spectacle.”

Jean Cocteau. Beauty and the Beast: Diary of a Film. Dover, NY, 1972

The postulate of the story requires faith, the faith of childhood. I mean that one must believe implicitly at the very beginning and not question the possibility that the mere picking of a rose might lead a family into adventure, or that a man can be changed into a beast, and vice versa. Such enigmas offend grown-ups who are really prejudiced, proud of their doubt, armed with derision. But I have the impudence to believe that the cinema which depicts the impossible is apt to carry conviction, in a way, and may be able to put a “singular” occurrence into the plural.

It is up to us (that is, to me and my unit—fact, one entity) to avoid those impossibilities which are even more of a jolt in the midst of the improbable than in the midst of reality. For fantasy has its own laws which are like those of perspective. You may not bring what is distant into the foreground, or render fuzzily what is near. The vanishing lines are impeccable and the orchestration so delicate that the slightest false note jars. I am not speaking of what I have achieved, but of what I shall attempt within the means at my disposal.

My method is simple: not to aim at poetry. That must come of its own accord. The mere whispered mention of its name frightens it away. I shall try to build a table. It will be up to you then to eat at it, to examine it or to chop it up for firewood.

Sunday, August 26, 1945

After a year of every sort of preparation and difficulty, I am going to start shooting tomorrow. It would be stupid to complain of the type of difficulties inherent in such a task, for I think that our work compels us to indulge in daydreams, to dream the most beautiful dreams. And what’s more, it will give us the opportunity to do what we like with human time, which is normally so painful to live through minute by minute, in order. To break time up, turn it inside out and upside down, is a real triumph over the inevitable.

I’m finding it very difficult to make the artists understand that the style of the film needs a luster and a lack of naturalness that are supernatural. There is not much dialogue. They cannot permit the least fuzziness. . . .

I am not a real director and probably never shall be. I get too interested in what is happening.

Christian Bérard’s part is immensely important in making the film. It’s strange having to invent some sort of formula so that we can list him in the credits without coming up against union regulations. His costumes, with their elegance, power and sumptuous simplicity, play just as big a part as the dialogue. They are not merely decorations; they reinforce the slightest gesture, and the artists find them comfortable. What a pity that France cannot yet afford the luxury of color films. The arrival of Beauty at the wash-house, wearing her grand sky-blue dress and surrounded by black chickens, was an absolute miracle.

Yesterday in the sedan-chair scene I used a long tracking shot. Finally, I deleted it. This film must prove that it’s possible to avoid camera movement and keep to a fixed frame.
With this postponement I have come to realize that the rhythm of the film is one of narrative. I am telling the story. It is as if I were hidden behind the screen, saying: “Then such and such a thing happened.” The characters don’t seem to be living a life of their own, but a life that is being narrated. Perhaps that’s how it should be in a fairy tale.

The make-up men and the dressers know their jobs. Lucile and Escoffier carry their tiny mistakes as if they were a cross. In short, the unit is an extension of myself. The old dream of forming one person out of many is fully realized.

Mounier said to me: “We’re counting on your work to re-establish French films.” To which I replied: “It’s funny that I, who am attacked on every side in France should, at the same time, be looked to to save the prestige of a country which calls me names. I shall do my best to make a film that will please me and the people I like. More than that, I don’t promise.”

A film is a monument, but built neither in the present, past or future.

Alekan (cinematographer) hasn’t enough confidence. He keeps hesitating and won’t take a bold enough line. The result is a certain softness in his work which I must try to correct. It’s all too “beautiful.” I would like it harsher, with more contrast. I’ll keep at him till he gets it. . .

I told Alekan off after the run-through. His mania for plotting his shots, yet at the same time making them appear diffuse, revolts me. It’s all too “artistic”. Nothing is equal to the sublimation of the documentary style. It is this style I want from him.

People have decided once and for all that fuzziness is poetic. Now, since in my eyes poetry is precision, number, I’m pushing Alekan in precisely the opposite direction from what fools think is poetic. He is slightly bewildered. . .

A film is a piece of writing in pictures, and I try to give it an atmosphere which will bring out the feeling in the film rather than correspond to the facts.

M. asked Paul: “Why is Jean making a film? They don’t last.” An amazing statement, As if anything at all was lasting, beginning with the world!

I am not a person who writes to regular hours. I only write when I cannot do otherwise. And as little as possible. Writing dialogue bores me. But to set in motion this giant dream machine, to wrestle with the angel of light, the angel of machines, the angel of space and time, is a job I am cut out for. The result doesn’t much matter.

Pascal saw my film last week. “France is the only country at present where you could possibly make a film like this,” he said. Whether it pleases or displeases is another matter. I have been able to complete it, thanks to the kindness of my colleagues, thanks to the ingenuity of the staff, thanks to that tradition of anarchy which still, in our country, permits the intrusion of accident into the midst of order.


Beauty and the Beast, the first film of Cocteau’s own since The Blood of a Poet, and his finest poem since then, is by general consent one of the most enchanting pictures ever made, and its production was one of those undertakings that, with a kind of general benevolence, shed luster on all its participants.

It brought new accolades to Mme Leprince de Beaumont, the eighteenth-century author of the fairy tale. Jean Marais had suggested the film; for him, his face masked by the fur and the fangs of the Beast, his body padded and swathed in velvet, his hands made into claws, it was his triumph of acting over physique. Lovely Josette Day played Beauty, the good country girl, with an intelligence and a dancer’s grace that Cocteau praised without reserve; and she, the actresses who play her wicked sisters, and the rest of the cast are outstanding in the way they speak, move, wear their clothes, and form tableaux à la Vermeer and Le Nain. The Gustave Doré sumptuousness of Christian Bérard’s costumes and decor is reminiscent, not in style but in spirit and success, of Bakst’s lavishness in ballet. In Bérard, Cocteau had found a new fellow master of fantasy, an antimodern, neobaroque successor to the Picasso of Parade; and the high style of his famous perspective of human arms emerging from draperies to grasp lighted candelabras that materialize in the air, the moving eyes of his dusky, smoke-breathing caryatids, his pair of Louis XIV marble busts of Turks, lend fantastic cinema a nobility that had been previously hinted at—one can only mention the earlier films again—in The Blood of a Poet. Henri Alekan gave the photography the tone Cocteau wanted, the “soft gleam of hand-polished old silver,” particularly exquisite in the swaying sheer white curtains, in Beauty’s tear that turns into a pearl. The most haunting feature is Marais’ Beast mask, a remarkable creation, so appealingly beastlike as to be more “becoming” than his lover’s-postcard transfiguration as Prince charming at the end of the film. In his autobiography, Marais talks about it: For my mask, we went to Pontet, an elderly gentleman, a real genius, one of those men who make you realize that one can be passionately in love with one’s work whatever it may be. He devoted a great deal of thought to how the mask could be given

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the look of my own face and not interfere with its mobility. He made a cast and worked on it endlessly. I often went to see him with Moulouk, and the dog taught us things: the unevenness and shagginess and spottiness of the fur that make it seem so alive are due to Moulouk. M. Pontet made my mask like a wig, hair on a webbing base, but in three parts—one down to the eyes, a second as far as the upper lip, and the third to the base of the neck. It took me five hours to make up—that meant thirteen hours a day in the studio. Because of the fangs attached to my teeth, all I could eat was mush, and that by the spoonful. Between takes, I scarcely dared open my mouth, lest the makeup become unglued; no one understood what I said, and that exasperated me.

“In my opinion,” wrote Cocteau, “one must have Marais’ passion for his work and his devotion to his dog to persevere as he did in deserting the human race for the animal race.”

The idea of the film was hard to sell to a producer, and although it became a professional and commercial undertaking, with well-paid stars, jealous unions, watchful insurance companies, and budgeted financing by Gaumont, Beauty and the Beast nevertheless represented a triumph over primary difficulties. Like most of the combatant countries, France emerged from the war stripped; Cocteau himself was receiving food packages from Jean-Pierre Aumont in California, and when he fell ill, he was treated with American penicillin; everything was in short supply. Old cameras jammed, old lenses developed flaws, no two batches of film were alike, electric current failed or was bureaucratically cut off; there was small choice of fabrics for costumes; sheets without patches were sought everywhere for the farmyard laundry scene; the curtains of Beauty’s bed were stolen from the set. There were the usual Coctelian coincidences and contradictions. In the manor outside Tours used as Beauty’s house was found a disc of Cocteau reading his poems; as a setting, the place was perfect—but it was near a military airfield, and though the goodwill of the commanding colonel was secured, he proved forgetful or a poor disciplinarian, and training flights constantly interfered with sound recording. The Château de Laray, near Senlis, used for exterior shots of the Beast’s castle, had “the most bizarre park in France,” with a fantastic sculptured stone procession of hunting dogs silhouetted against the sky, atop a high parapet; that made it, too, an appropriate setting—but there in the north, rain was incessant. (And local children, come to watch the filming, ran off terrified as the Beast emerged from bushes.) Just when the carcass of a deer was needed, the Paris wholesale game markets went on strike. Most of the cast was accident prone. Cocteau, scourged by his post-

occupation eczema, so disfigured that for a time he wore “a veil made of black paper, fastened to the brim of his hat with clothespins, with holes for his eyes and mouth,” developed jaundice, and filming was interrupted while he was hospitalized in the Institut Pasteur. The journal he kept during the filming, the predecessor of many later blow-by-blow accounts of the making of movies, and unique in being the work of the artist-moviemaker himself, swarms with the names of doctors. (The maddening irritation of the skin disease was one of the reasons Cocteau returned to opium for a time in 1946–47. On January 23, 1947, the newspaper Franc-Tireur published his photograph—one of his few unposed pictures—amid a group of addicts summoned to the Palais de Justice. In later years, Cocteau seems to have smoked with moderation, when at all.)

The filming of Beauty and the Beast brought Cocteau an enchantment reminiscent of his days with the Diaghilev troupe, the sensation of being part of a hardworking family of sacred monsters; moving from manor to château to Paris film studio, they were like mountebanks; Cocteau’s journal celebrates the camaraderie and goodwill of the company—the actors’ professional tolerance of each other’s crises de nerfs, their busy shuttling between the film studio and the legitimate theaters where some of them were simultaneously appearing in plays, the combination of familiarity and respect shown by the grips, their never-failing improvisation when rescue was needed, the studio sweepers’ praise after the first rushes, the Vouvray wine with the picnic meals, cast and crew playing cards during rests, Marais hilariously plunging clothed into a fountain one midnight, celebrating with the people of Tours the first anniversary of their liberation. “I wonder,” Cocteau wrote, “whether these days of hard work aren’t the most delicious of my life. Full of friendship, affectionate disagreement, laughter, profiting from every moment.” The breakup was sentimental. “We shall be working tonight. The last night. I know nothing sadder than the end of a film, the dissolution of a team that has developed ties of affection.”

After cutting, after the synchronization of Auric’s music—Auric was the only veteran of The Blood of a Poet to collaborate on Beauty and the Beast—the first showing of the film for an audience of any size was for the technicians in the Joinville studio. The invitation was written on the studio blackboard; schedules were changed to leave everyone free. “The welcome picture received from that audience of workers was unforgettable. It was my greatest reward. Whatever happens, nothing will ever equal the grace of that ceremony organized,
very simply, by a little village of workmen whose trade is the packaging of dreams.” That night, the journal ends: “Afterward, at ten, I had dinner at the Palais-Royal with Bérard, Boris, Auric, Jean Marais, Claude Ibéria (the editor of the film), and we promised each other to work together always. May fate never separate us.”

Geoffrey O’Brien, “Beauty and the Beast: Dark Magic (Criterion notes)

Out of the extravagant variety of Jean Cocteau’s work—the paintings and drawings, the poems, the plays and novels and memoirs, the opera librettos and ballet scenarios—it is likely his films that will have the most enduring influence, and among those, Beauty and the Beast (1946) will have the most pervasive effect. When it comes to “fairy-tale movies”—if such a genre exists as something other than a profit center for the Disney corporation—there is Cocteau’s Beauty and the Beast and then there is everything else. It is a safe bet that no one who surrenders to it at an impressionable age ever quite escapes the distinct and disturbing enchantments it sets in motion. It is also perhaps the most self-effacing of Cocteau’s works. His flamboyance and wit are placed at the service of the old folkloric tale by Mme Leprince de Beaumont; even as he adds his characteristic complications to the tale—giving the Beast a thoroughly earthly and unenchanted doppelgänger, Avenant, and adding a mythic dimension by means of a secret temple to Diana—he allows the pure force of the narrative to assert itself, as if he were content for once to figure as a kind of medieval artisan. An artisan among artisans: the film is virtually a showcase for the best in French production design (Christian Bérard), music (Georges Auric), cinematography (Henri Alekan), and costuming (Marcel Escoffier). Yet the net effect is, if anything, austere rather than lush, a tribute to Cocteau’s unerring sense that here the tale, with its mysterious imperatives, is everything.

The film is inescapably tied up with the war during which it was planned. Shooting began four months after the German surrender. The deprivations of the period account for the fact that it was not filmed in color, as Cocteau had wished—hard as it is to imagine the movie apart from Alekan’s black-and-white palette, with its careful distinction between a deceptively sunny ordinary reality and the Beast’s domain of night. This harshness in the background is perceptible in other ways as well. The storybook setting of a seventeenth-century farmhouse, into which we are ushered with the phrase “once upon a time,” is revealed within a few moments as a place of vanity and venality, cowardice and petty-minded squabbling, slaps and insults. It is a fallen world, in which Belle (Josette Day) seems to withdraw into a hermetic suffering amid the meanness of her elder sisters, the feeble opportunism of her brother, the moral weakness of her father, and the overtures of Jean Marais’ handsome and empty Avenant. The hellishness of this pictorially elegant but resolutely unmagical reality, further amplified by the implied rapacity of encircling creditors and moneylenders, makes it an unlikely setting for any conceivable “happy ever after.” By establishing how truly oppressive is the world that Belle and her father inhabit, Cocteau makes all the more uncanny the discovery, by the harried merchant, of a passageway out of it, into the Beast’s realm. It is like the breaching of a seam, and we are carried through every part of the process: through the misty forest and up a deserted staircase, through the great door and, in the most otherworldly of camera movements, down the hall of human arms extending candelabra whose flames spontaneously flare up—a rite of initiation that loses none of its power from learning that it was achieved by filming the action backward, and that it was shot not by Cocteau but by his assistant, René Clément. You can play it back time and again without exhausting the sense of shock at having passed through some ordinary, invisible portal.

If this is magic, it is a shaggy, palpable sort of magic. As a true poet—whether writing verse or otherwise—Cocteau had a poet’s hard-earned mistrust of the merely atmospheric, decorative vagueness misnamed “poetic”: “My method,” he wrote at the outset of his journal of the shooting of Beauty and the Beast, “is simple: not to aim at poetry. That must come of its very unmagical reality, further amplified by the implied rapacity of encircling creditors and moneylenders, makes it an unlikely setting for any conceivable “happy ever after.” The result, of course, was a film that, as much as any other, has been praised as lyrical, almost unbearable in its ethereal gorgeousness, a triumph of the imagination—even when it may just as accurately be described as tough-minded, down-to-earth, ferociously unsentimental. If Cocteau’s film continues to breathe, as few have done, the air of the fantastic, it is because we sense at each moment that we are caught up in a process governed by laws, laws that may be difficult to explain or even articulate but that express themselves by the most concrete means: “Fantasy has its own laws, which are like those of perspective. You may not bring what is distant into the foreground nor render fuzzily what is near.” Like a ritual
performed in order to produce results, not just to make the participants feel good, *Beauty and the Beast* moves through its phases undistracted by anything, focused only on the business at hand.

Any prettiness is incidental, mere drapery over darker and more archaic imperatives. The underlying structure is nearly pitiless, an intricately intermeshing machinery loaded with hidden traps. Cocteau has a logician’s respect for the orders of ritual and the cruel demands of ritual sacrifice. His “magic” has, from certain angles, the paranoid efficiency of a cosmic prison house in which miracles exist but only at a rigorously exacted price. The weightless happiness that is the perennial promise of both fairy tales and movies is to be attained at a cost measured out frame by frame, in a story more full of suffering than of wish fulfillment—and in which, indeed, the promise of ecstasy embraced in the moment of final metamorphosis quickly threatens to become a more banal contentment. Even as Belle and her prince (the Beast transformed into the double of the unreliable Avenant) soar into the sky, she seems already to realize that this is not exactly what she wanted. The instant reaction attributed to Greta Garbo captures perfectly the strange disappointment of the “happy” ending: “Give me back my Beast!”

In *Beauty and the Beast*, as previously in *The Blood of a Poet* (1930) and later in *Orpheus* (1950), Cocteau was able to realize the fantastic not as an escape from the real but as an extension of it, as its reverse side. He has no interest in Neverlands or Wonderland. He approaches the paraphernalia of the fairy tale—those enchanted mirrors, keys, gloves—with a technician’s dispassion, no more taken aback by their existence than by the existence of trees or streams or horses or rose gardens, but endlessly curious about how they function. For Cocteau, “movie magic” is not a glib catchphrase. As a science of transformation, cinema becomes true alchemy. The mirror in *The Blood of a Poet* that becomes a splashing pool as one passes through it is not an illusion but an achieved reality; in *Orpheus*, the comings and goings between the realms of the living and the dead are rendered in a deadpan spirit of documentary observation. If magic requires the use of specialized equipment, for Cocteau that equipment includes the whole somnambulistic repertoire of the movies’ night side, from Méliès on out. When in watching *Beauty and the Beast* we think at one moment or another of *Nosferatu* or *Metropolis* or *Dracula* or *King Kong*, it is not with the sense that they have been imitated or self-consciously alluded to but as if their effective elements have been incorporated wholesale, as needed, by the resident shaman. The magic is sexual throughout—a fantastic, but not in the least morbid or phantasmal, sex magic. What could be more direct and free of coyness than the image of the Beast drinking water from Belle’s hands, although it is so chaste that no censor could have ever assailed it? It is matched by the tactile immediacy of the moment when the grieving Beast presses his furry face against the fur coverlet of Belle’s empty bed. The irresistible effect of everything that happens after Belle enters the castle is tied to the pair’s aura of forbidden intimacy: her slow-motion advance into the Beast’s great hall, as she moves past the billowing white curtains and Auric’s music bursts out in choral ululations; her passage through the talking door, into the privacies of mirror and bed; the night wanderings in which she spies on the Beast in the aftermath of his nocturnal slaughters, while he stares in horror at his smoking hands.

The extraordinarily beautiful shot in which we see the Beast from behind, his head haloed in light, as he ascends the stairs with Belle in his arms, while on the other side of the screen, light streams through dungeonlike grillwork, conjures with gothic intensity the imminence of a sexual fantasy fulfilled, in a setting made for such fulfillment—a bedroom hidden within a castle hidden within a forest—and with Beauty delivered defenseless into the embrace of a Beast manifestly able to sweep away all resistance. The erotic force of the episode that follows is outdone only by the even greater emotional force of the restraint that stops him in his tracks and sends him rushing out of the room, saying, “You mustn’t look into my eyes.” It is, of course, his eyes that we look at, glistening from within the multilayered makeup that cost Marais five hours of application each day, makeup so expressive that Marais’ real face seems a blank by comparison. We cannot shake the certainty that an actual creature has been introduced into the world, and the sorrow provoked by his disappearance recurs anew on each viewing. I doubt whether so solitary and tragic a figure has ever been so fully realized in movies before or since, and realized here not only through Hagop Arakelian’s makeup skills and Marais’ performance but through the universe created to form a context around him, made out of Cocteau’s words, Auric’s music, Alekan’s images.

As for Belle, she is, finally, almost as much of a cipher as the statue of Diana that breaks the spell by shooting an arrow into the rascally Avenant. When the Beast tells her, “You are the only master here,” he underscores the cruelty at the heart of Cocteau’s fable. Beauty is indeed the master of all the craftsmanlike skills brought to their highest pitch to realize this singular vision: a Beauty who may offer love or capriciously withhold it, a Beauty who wants only a rose—even if that rose may threaten death to anyone who gives it to her—a Beauty who may, after all, know herself least well and therefore never fully grasp her own all-determining power. Only in the mirror world of art can Beauty and Beast truly cohabit. And even for Cocteau, master of such a range of arts, what art but cinema—the magic mirror itself—could ever realize that cohabitation so persuasively?
Cocteau’s source & sources on Cocteau

COMING UP IN THE FALL 2011 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXIII:
September 20 The Red Shoes, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (1948)
September 27 Diary of a Country Priest/Journal d’un curé de campagne, Robert Bresson (1951)
October 4 Black Orpheus/Orfeu Negro, Marcel Camus (1959)
    October 11 Bonnie and Clyde, Arthur Penn (1967)
    October 18 Marketa Lazarová, František Vláčil (1967)
    October 25 The Last Wave, Peter Weir (1977)
November 1 True Confessions, Ulu Grosbard (1981)
November 8 Chunking Express/Chung Hing sam lam, Wong Kar-Wei (1994)
November 22 Frida, Julie Taymor (2002)
November 29 Revanche, Götz Spielmann (2008)
December 6 My Fair Lady, George Cukor (1964)

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